



Gender Differences in the Use of Parental Alienating Behaviors

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Abstract

Past research indicates females prefer the use of indirect over direct forms of aggression, whereas the opposite pattern has been found for males. We investigated a specific form of aggression: parental alienating behaviors. Parents who alienate their children from another parent utilize both direct and indirect forms of aggression. We examined whether there are gender differences in the use of these behaviors by analyzing data from two samples: interviews with parents who have been the target of parental alienating behaviors, and family law appellate court rulings in which parental alienation was found. In both studies, mothers used significantly more indirect than direct parental alienating strategies. In contrast, fathers tended to use similar levels of both indirect and direct parental alienating strategies. Further, fathers did not use more direct forms of this type of aggression than mothers. Better standards of practice for the assessment of parental alienation must be developed to prevent misdiagnoses and gender biases.

Keywords Parental alienating behaviors · Aggression · Gender differences · Parental alienation · Family law · Assessment

Aggression is behavior that is intended to cause harm to another (Anderson and Bushman 2002), and is often equated with direct forms of aggression such as verbal and physical aggression (Forrest et al. 2005). Due to this narrow conceptualization of aggression, a gender bias has been created that portrays men as more aggressive than women, despite women having been found to experience as much anger as men, having the same ability to harm (e.g., White and Kowalski 1994), and preferring other less obvious forms of aggression such as indirect aggression (Lagerspetz et al. 1988). Direct verbal and physical aggression include behaviors such as verbal or physical threats and/or assault. Indirect aggression, on the other hand, involves circuitous approaches aimed to socially manipulate and harm the target, and includes such behaviors as gossiping, social exclusion, and any other attempts to lower the target's social standing (Björkqvist 2018). An alternate term for indirect aggression is relational aggression (Crick and Grotpeter 1995), but we will use the original term of indirect aggression in this research

because both indirect and relational aggression terms refer to the same phenomenon in social relationships (Archer and Coyne 2005; Björkqvist 2018).

During childhood, boys and girls can display aggression in different ways (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). While they exhibit similar levels of verbal aggression (Björkqvist 2018), boys have been found to display more physical aggression than girls (Lussier et al. 2012; Österman et al. 1998; Yuan et al. 2014). In contrast, prior research has indicated that girls appear to prefer indirect to direct forms of aggression (Björkqvist 2018; Österman et al. 1998); however, boys and girls have been found to use similar levels of indirect aggression (Card et al. 2008).

Gender differences in aggression among adults also have been documented. For example, men use more direct forms of aggression than women (Bettencourt et al. 2006; Burton et al. 2007), and men are more likely to directly aggress against someone of higher status, whereas women are more likely to directly aggress against someone of lower status (Terrell et al. 2008). Research examining gender differences in the use of indirect forms of aggression among adults has been more limited than that for children (Murray-Close et al. 2010). Sparse evidence has been found for gender differences in the use of indirect aggression in adult populations; both men and women have been found to use similar levels of it (Archer and Coyne 2005; Forrest et al. 2005; Scheithauer et al. 2008; Zapor et al. 2017). The literature thus indicates that there are similar

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gender differences in the use of indirect and direct aggression among adults and children, with men and women using similar levels of indirect aggression, and women preferring the use of indirect over direct aggression; in contrast to women, men use similar levels of both forms of aggression.

Psychologists have struggled with explaining why men and women vary in their use of aggression. Evolutionary theorists have suggested that one of the primary drivers of aggression is intrasexual mate competition—when men and women compete with one another for desirable mates (Darwin 1871). Indirect aggression is described as one way to decrease a rival's mate value, such that the perpetrator focuses on devaluing characteristics valued by the opposite sex (attractiveness, earning potential; Buss and Dedden 1990). Social learning processes have also been supported as explanations for aggression, such that individuals of lower social status tend to use more indirect over direct strategies to be less identifiable as the perpetrator and less likely to be harmed in the process of aggressing directly (Conway et al. 2005). Women tend to hold less status than men across human societies (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), so women's greater use of indirect aggression has often been explained from this latter perspective (e.g., Eagly and Steffen 1986; White and Kowalski 1994). The purpose of the current work is not to specifically address the various theoretical debates about gender differences in the use of aggression, but to extend previous research on gender differences in the use of direct and indirect forms of aggression in men versus women for a specific form of family violence: parental alienating behaviors.

Parental Alienating Behaviors

Parental alienation refers to a child's rejection or refusal to have a relationship with a parent due to untrue, illogical, or exaggerated reasons (Bernet et al. 2016). Parental alienation is an outcome associated with behaviors typically perpetrated by the child's favored parent that are designed to distance the child from the targeted parent (Harman et al. 2018). This outcome is the result of consistent use of direct or indirect aggressive behaviors, enacted over time, with intent to harm the targeted parent and their relationship with a child (Harman et al. 2019; Verrocchio et al. 2017). In other words, parental alienation does not occur because of discrete, one-time actions, but takes place over a span of time. Parental alienating behaviors have been advanced as child abuse (Kruk 2018; von Boch-Galhau 2018) and intimate partner violence (Harman et al. 2018), and can occur in both intact and separated/divorced families, although the latter is the more common form (Baker and Verrocchio 2015).

Parents who engage in parental alienating behaviors use many different strategies intended to distance the child from the targeted parent. Tactics include distortions of reality (e.g., gaslighting), lies about the targeted parent, blocking of communication and visitation with the targeted parent, and use of legal and administrative aggression, to name just a few (for a full review, see Harman et al. 2018). Alienating parents also engage in covert manipulative strategies such as promoting the unquestioned loyalty and dependency of the children to the alienating parent and asking the children to spy on the targeted parent (Harman and Matthewson *in press*). Thus, alienating parents use both direct and indirect forms of aggression to accomplish their goal.

Mothers and fathers are both likely to be the target of parental alienating behaviors (Harman et al. 2016, 2019), so perpetrators of this form of family violence can be either gender. López et al. (2014) found that alienating mothers were more likely than fathers to frequently telephone their children when with the targeted parent, seek accomplices for their alienating behaviors, frighten their children into thinking the targeted parent will harm them, and seek medical or psychological reports as “evidence” to use against the targeted parent. On the other hand, the authors found that alienating fathers were more likely to encourage their children to challenge and defy the targeted parent's authority and rules. Determining whether there are gender differences in the use of parental alienating behaviors is important because much more needs to be known about how this form of violence operates in the family system (Harman et al. 2018). In addition, there are important practical implications for this research because mental health and legal professionals (e.g., custody evaluators, guardian ad litem) must assess behaviors of parents in order to make recommendations for intervention. Covert forms of indirect aggression are more challenging to identify than direct forms of aggression (Forrest et al. 2005).

The first hypothesis for the current set of studies was that mothers use proportionally more indirect forms of parental alienating behaviors than fathers, as past research indicates that females have a greater preference for the use of indirect than direct forms of aggression (Björkqvist 2018). Past research has not indicated that adult males use more or less indirect aggression than adult females (e.g., Archer and Coyne 2005; Card et al. 2008), so we did not hypothesize that there would be gender differences in the overall use of indirect aggression. However, we hypothesized that fathers would use more direct forms of aggression than mothers would, although they would also use indirect forms. We tested these gender-based hypotheses using two unique samples, which are presented below as Study 1, which included parents who have been the targets of parental alienating behaviors, and Study 2,

which used a sample of appellate court rulings in which parental alienation had been found to be an issue for the families.

Study 1: Targeted Parents

Method

Participants This research study was approved by the first author's university institutional review board. Parents who volunteered for the study were recruited from a variety of sources. Social media posts describing the study were posted on special interest groups on Facebook and LinkedIn. Groups were selected via searches for topics related to parental alienation, divorced parents, co-parenting, single parents, and victims of narcissistic abuse. In addition, details were sent to moderators of Meet-up groups (www.meetup.com) in the U. S. and Canada to promote to their members. The groups selected were alimony and family law reform groups, parental alienation support groups, and divorced and single parent groups. The recruitment statement introduced the researchers and the study about parental alienation (which was then defined) and stated that the researchers were looking for volunteers to participate in the study.

A link to an on-line survey was provided which asked about basic demographic information and presented a screening questionnaire with 21 questions about alienating behaviors and outcomes that were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .83$). At the time the survey was administered, there were not yet any empirically validated surveys that could determine whether, from the parent's perspective, they had been alienated from a child (e.g., Rowlands 2018). Therefore, the first and third author wrote questions designed to assess whether the parents were actually targets of parental alienating behaviors that were affecting their relationship with their child(ren) based on symptoms and behaviors described in previous research (e.g., Baker and Darnall 2006). All items appear in Appendix. The rationale for this survey was to help us identify those parents who are alienated (rather than those who just believe they are) so that they could be selected for the interview study.

At the end of the survey, respondents were presented with a statement requesting volunteers who were willing to be interviewed about their personal parental alienation story. The respondents were asked to provide an email address to be contacted if they wanted to be interviewed. We initially obtained 536 emails from parents who were willing to be interviewed. All 536 parents could not reasonably be interviewed for the study, so the first author contacted groups of parents by email (~20 at a time) who had scores above three on the alienation measure (which would indicate slight to

strong agreement with the majority of the 21 items on the screening questionnaire in Appendix) to send them a layered consent form with details about the study. Consenting parents provided permission to be interviewed by Skype, Google Hangout or phone (if the other two approaches were not feasible), have their interview audio recorded and transcribed, and for the team to use their interview for research purposes. After signing and scanning/emailing or mailing back the consent form, the first author scheduled the parent to a 60–90-min interview with one of five trained interviewers, depending on their availability.

The research team interviewed the seventy-nine parents who provided signed consent forms: 50 fathers and 29 mothers (32.5% of 243 invited). Initially, most parents who agreed to be interviewed were fathers, so after we interviewed fifty fathers, we stopped recruitment of them and focused exclusively on mothers to have a more balanced sample of both genders. We received many more consent forms from parents that we were unable to interview due to scheduling conflicts, or we received them after we completed data collection. Nine interviewees used a different email address to return the consent form that was sent to them, so we were unable to match their interview to their survey responses.

Of the 70 interviewees for which we had survey data, their average age was 46.36 years (range 26–59, $SD = 7.71$). Yearly household income was widely distributed, with the modal income range being between \$60 and \$80K USD a year ($n = 14$; 13 reported incomes of < \$25 K, and 17 reported incomes > \$120 K). Most parents were white (81.4%, $n = 57$), with three parents indicating being Black, Hispanic, Asian, and biracial respectively, and one parent reporting being Native American. Most participants were from the United States (85.7%, $n = 60$), three were from Canada, two from England, two from Australia, and one parent from each of the following countries: Sweden, Belgium, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Netherlands. Many parents had a bachelor's degree or higher (65.6%, $n = 46$), and 22 parents had remarried since their divorce from the alienating parent. Of the 53 parents who provided information, the average amount of time they had been separated/divorced from the alienating parent was 7.17 years ($SD = 4.83$; one parent was still married to the alienating parent). The mean rating on our alienation measure for the sample was 3.95 ($SD = 0.56$), so these parents agreed with most statements that indicated being the target of parental alienating behaviors and that the behaviors had affected their relationship with their child(ren). A handful of parents we interviewed scored just below the mid-point on the scale described above, but they reported in their comments that they had not seen or heard from their child(ren) or the other parent in years so they could not really answer many of

the questions. We therefore did not exclude these particular parents from participating in the interviews.

Materials A semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the first and third author that contained 16 general questions, followed by a series of prompts to gather additional information. The authors, who are experts on parental alienation and child attachment, wrote the questions based on their research interests in learning about how parents alienate their children, how the behaviors affect the parent-child relationships, and how they are coping with the problem. The questions were not pretested, but the first and third author discussed their impressions of the questions after conducting their first interview to ensure that they were eliciting the desired information (no adjustments were decided to be necessary). The questions related to a variety of topics, such as the custody/parenting time situation with their children, specific parental alienating behaviors that the alienating parent has used over time, perceptions of motivation, coping strategies, and plans moving forward. We examined any mention of parental alienating behaviors, some of which were described when an interview question probed for this information specifically, and others that were spontaneously mentioned over the course of the interview. The specific questions that asked about parental alienating behaviors were:

- 1) What early examples can you provide that your ex either did, or that your children did that made you feel you are being alienated (please provide at least four)?
- 2) Can you provide four or more recent and specific examples of alienation that have happened?
- 3) Has your ex used others (e.g., friends, medical providers) to assist with the alienation? In what ways were they involved?
- 4) How often, if at all, has your ex engaged in stalking or harassing behaviors with you? Could you describe them?
- 5) How has the alienation changed over time, if at all? Has it gotten better or worse at times? Why?

Design and Procedure We utilized a qualitative research method, so we planned to schedule interviews until we reached a saturation point (Guest et al. 2006), meaning that additional interviews did not provide any new information. After each interviewer completed around five interviews with fathers and mothers, the research team felt they had already reached saturation (~approximately at the 25 interview point for each gender). Despite this saturation, we conducted an additional 29 interviews, just in case we would uncover additional information. After transcribing all the interviews, the transcripts were sent to the parents for edits and corrections in case they felt they misspoke or left out anything important. Approximately ¼ of the parents returned their edited

transcripts with updates about what had been happening with their children. This information was also included in our analysis.

Data Coding A directed content analysis approach was used (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999) such that we created coding categories defined by how direct and indirect aggression have been described in previous literature. Parental alienating behaviors were first identified in the transcripts based on those previously described by experts in the field (e.g., Baker and Darnall 2006; Harman et al. 2018; Harman and Matthewson *in press*). Operational definitions of direct and indirect aggression were next developed based on how the terms have been defined by previous theorists and researchers (e.g., Björkqvist 2018; Forrest et al. 2005; Lagerspetz et al. 1988). Direct aggression referred to those behaviors that are harmful as goals themselves and included direct threats or insults to the targeted parent, stalking and harassment, as well as easily identifiable and behaviors that had a direct impact on the targeted parent, such as explicit blocking of contact, interference of parenting time, and blocking of information about the child (e.g., taking the targeted parent off school records).

Measurement issues have plagued the study of indirect aggression because it is often difficult to observe and measure them (Forrest et al. 2005). We operationalized indirect aggression as others have: as covert, hidden, and manipulative behaviors that are used to achieve a goal (e.g., gain control of the targeted parent, loyalty of the child) rather than being a goal in and of themselves (see Forrest et al. 2005 for more details on examples of these types of behaviors). These behaviors typically entail using others to harm the targeted parent (e.g., derogation to teachers, friends, the children), increase loyalty of the child (e.g., fostering dependency), and include false reports of abuse made to authorities because these forms are more circuitous than direct. Examples of these types of behaviors are presented in Table 1. We categorized some behaviors as both direct and indirect aggression, depending on the target of the behavior and the context where it was exhibited. For example, if an alienating parent yelled and screamed at the targeted parent at a parenting time exchange (direct aggression), this behavior was also coded as indirect aggression because the child witnessed the behavior. In this case, the relationship between the targeted parent and child is damaged indirectly by witnessing the direct attack.

Children who are alienated often become enmeshed with the alienating parent, such that their identity becomes fused and undifferentiated from them (Harman et al. 2018). When children were used by the alienating parent as a weapon and had internalized the alienating parent's negative feelings towards the targeted parent, their behaviors were therefore coded as if they were the perpetrating party (the alienating parent). For example, if the child yelled at the targeted parent and called them names, destroyed their property under advisement

Table 1 Examples of direct and indirect parental alienating behaviors

Direct aggression	Indirect aggression
Alienating parent hits the targeted parent at a parenting time exchange Severly alienated child calls the targeted parent names	Alienating parent badmouths the targeted parent to a child Alienating parent calls the police to get the targeted parent arrested based on a false claim
Alienating parent blocks parenting time with child Child destroys property of targeted parent	Alienating parent turns friends and family against the targeted parent Alienating parent tells children false stories about targeted parent from the past
Alienating parent sends hostile emails and texts to the targeted parent Alienating parent blocks or changes phone number so targeted parent cannot talk with child	Alienating parent tells children details about court proceedings Alienating parent yells at the targeted parent in front of the children
Alienating parent makes unilateral decisions about the children, in violation of court orders	Alienating parent lists step-parent on school records as the biological parent

Due to the sheer number of alienating behaviors described by parents, there is not space to list them all in one table. The table therefore contains examples of the behaviors

of the alienating parent, or refused to see the targeted parent for extended periods of time, their behaviors were coded as if it was the alienating parent doing the direct form of behaviors because the child was essentially acting as their proxy. The only exception to this coding rule was when it was clear the child had not internalized the alienating parent's negativity and was only repeating back what the alienating parent said, such as with young children who used borrowed language from the parent and did not really know the meaning of what they were saying. These were not coded as direct aggression because the targeted parent often did not take it personally that the child believed or understood what they said, and they knew the child was merely parroting back what the alienating parent had told them.

After initial conferencing, the first author and a team of students arrived at the definition of direct and indirect aggression, as well as the behaviors that would be categorized as such. Four trained graduate and undergraduate research assistants coded each transcript for specific mention of direct and indirect parental alienating behaviors. One team consisted of two advanced undergraduate students and the first author. The research assistants from the first team graduated before half of the interviews could be coded, so another team was formed consisting of an advanced undergraduate student and a graduate student working with the first author. Coders worked in their teams to identify all parental alienating behaviors mentioned in the transcripts, and they met on a weekly basis to review their codes. The number of discrepancies between the coders varied from 0 to 5 for each transcript, with the most common discrepancies being due to a particular behavior being missed by a coder. There was near perfect agreement on the direct and indirect codes for behaviors (97.5% agreement across 2248 discrete behaviors, Cohen's Kappa = 0.95), and discrepancies were reconciled by discussion. All data were then input into an SPSS database for analysis. While the original transcripts are not available for sharing due to

confidentiality concerns, this database is available from the first author upon request.

Results and Discussion: Study 1

To test our hypotheses, we created a dummy code for the gender of the parent described. For example, if a mother described the alienating behaviors of a father, then the gender for the perpetrator was the father. There were five step-mothers who had described the behaviors of the alienating mother towards her and the father during their interviews, so the perpetrator in these families was the mother. There was a considerable amount of variability in the number of alienating behaviors that were described by the parents, from seven in two cases, to 69 in another; the average number of behaviors described was 28.46 ($SD = 14.65$). While this number seems large, interviewees were asked to provide specific examples of alienating behaviors over time, and many of the parents we interviewed had been experiencing parental alienation for five or more years. Parents described many examples ranging from having their visitation or access to their child(ren) blocked by the alienating parent, to being badmouthed by them, to needing to address false allegations of abuse. There were no gender differences in the total number of parental alienating behaviors described by the parents, $p > .05$.

Our first hypothesis was that mothers would use proportionally more indirect forms (compared to direct forms) of parental alienating behaviors, but that fathers would not differ in their use of indirect versus direct forms of aggression. These hypotheses were supported, such that mothers tended to prefer the use of indirect over direct strategies, and fathers tended to use both strategies fairly equally. Specifically, paired samples t -tests were conducted for mothers and fathers separately, and, as expected, we found that mothers were more likely to use indirect strategies ($M = 16.00$, $SD = 9.68$) than direct strategies ($M = 11.94$, $SD = 8.42$), $t(50) = 3.13$, $p < .01$, CIs 1.45 to 6.66.

In contrast to mothers, there was not a statistically significant difference in the use of direct or indirect strategies for fathers, $p > .05$. To further examine this finding, we created dummy codes for each case such that proportions below 47% were coded 0 (more direct), above 53% were coded 1 (more indirect), and $50\% \pm 3\%$ was coded 2. The percentage of alienating parents who fell into each category appears in Table 2. Over half of mothers (56.86%) were described as using predominantly indirect strategies, with the remaining mothers being similarly split between using direct strategies primarily and using equal numbers of both. In contrast, over 60% of fathers (62.07%) were described as using direct aggression over indirect aggression, with about 1/5 (20.69%) using indirect strategies, and 13.79% using both in similar quantities.

We also hypothesized that fathers would use more direct forms of aggression than mothers, and that mothers and fathers would both be just as likely to use indirect forms. To test this hypothesis, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted and revealed a main effect for type of aggression: mothers and fathers used more indirect ($M = 16.03$, $SD = 8.84$) than direct forms ($M = 12.43$, $SD = 8.69$) of aggression, $F(1,77) = 8.97$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.84$. Contrary to expectations, however, there was not a Gender \times Type of aggression interaction effect, $p > .05$. Fathers were not more likely to use direct aggression than mothers.

In summary, we found that a substantial proportion of parents (13.79% fathers, 19.61% mothers) were reported as having used nearly equal amounts of both forms of aggression. We did find evidence that mothers preferred indirect over direct aggression, with over half reported as using them more than direct aggression, and about 2/3 of fathers were reported as preferring the use of direct strategies over indirect strategies. It is interesting, however, that both mothers and fathers used indirect strategies and that this was not exclusively a mother phenomenon.

Study 2: Appellate Court Rulings

In our second study, we examined appellate court rulings from a sample of cases in the U.S. in which parental alienation had

Table 2 Numbers of parents who exhibited greater or lesser proportions of indirect behaviors

Gender	> Indirect	> Direct	Equal proportions
Female alienators			
Study 1 ($n = 51$)	56.86%	23.53%	19.61%
Study 2 ($n = 20$)	80.0%	15.0%	5.0%
Male alienators			
Study 1 ($n = 29$)	20.69%	62.07%	13.79%
Study 2 ($n = 20$)	45.0%	40.0%	15.0%

been found to occur. The advantage of this approach is that the factual findings provided in the appellate decisions are from lower court rulings in which evidence, testimony, and witnesses had been presented by both parents, and the rulings often contained impressions and details provided by court appointed custody evaluators and guardian ad litem. Having multiple sources of data can provide a more thorough picture of the types of strategies that the alienating parent was found to definitively have used to alienate their child from the targeted parent.

Method

Materials Legal cases were selected from a database query using the ALLSTATES Westlaw database that were used for another research project, and a full description of the methods used can be found in Lorandos (in press). In short, the query pulled every state appellate case in the United States that met three criteria: 1) it contains the root word fragment ‘alienat’ (which would include any of the following words: ‘alienate,’ ‘alienated,’ ‘alienating’ or ‘alienation’); 2) ‘alienat’ word appears within three words of any one of these words: ‘mother,’ ‘father,’ ‘son,’ ‘daughter,’ or the root word fragment ‘parent’; and 3) the case was released and available in the ALLSTATES database after 1984 and before 2019. This initial query resulted in 2123 case reports which were downloaded in order to be reviewed for inclusion.

The inclusion criteria for the cases from this initial database query was conservative to account for potential biases in the court records. Therefore, cases were only selected that involved an independent evaluating expert (e.g., a psychologist, guardian ad litem) testifying on the subject of parental alienation, whether or not the expert found parental alienation, or if the court found on any basis that there was parental alienation, whether or not there was expert testimony. Six paid legal research assistants who were trained by the second author evaluated each case reports for this inclusion criteria. Four of these assistants were law school graduates who were awaiting results of their bar exams, one was a forensic psychology doctoral candidate, and another was a paralegal with a bachelor’s degree and ten years of legal experience. Three of these assistants were men, and three were women. The second author had monthly research meetings with the research team to review the cases that were included in the original data set, resulting in 642 cases that met the inclusion criteria.

As 642 cases are not feasible to code in their entirety, a subsample of the cases was selected for Study 2. The female paralegal and male doctoral candidate selected 40 cases each where a female and male were the alienating parent. Appellate judges varied considerably in the detail provided about the case in their rulings, so the assistants, who were blind to the study’s hypotheses, were asked to select cases that provided details of discrete parental alienating behaviors. After

selecting these cases, the assistants met with the second author, who at the time was also blind to the study's hypotheses, to narrow the samples down to 20 cases for each gender (40 total). These final cases were deemed to be rich in detail about the types of behaviors that alienating mothers and fathers do. The final data set of 40 cases were from 1994 through 2017, with the majority (87.5%) being rulings entered 2012 or later. The cases were drawn from 22 different states: Indiana (5 cases), Connecticut (5 cases), Arizona (3 cases), California (3 cases), New York (3 cases), Michigan (2 cases), Illinois (2 cases), Texas (2 cases), Florida (2 cases), and one case from each of the remaining states (Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, Iowa, Montana, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Alaska, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Massachusetts).

Data Coding The appellate rulings were analyzed using the same strategy described in Study 1 except that because there was a high degree of rater agreement in the first study, the first author coded all appellate reports and the fourth author coded a subsample of these to ensure reliability (25% of cases). Of the 10 randomly selected cases (5 for each gender of alienator), there was almost perfect agreement (91.5% agreement; Cohen's Kappa = 0.83) of the 178 behaviors identified in this subsample and their codes (direct or indirect forms of aggression;). The majority of the disagreements were due to failure to identify a specific behavior. Disagreements in the double coded cases were reconciled, and agreement was considered high enough to not require an additional second coder of the remaining cases.

Results and Discussion: Study 2

There was a considerable amount of variability in the number of alienating behaviors that were detailed in the appellate cases, from one richly described behavior mentioned in one case, to 90 described in another; the average number of behaviors described was 19.30 ($SD = 17.07$), with a total number of behaviors being 772. There were no gender differences in the total number of parental alienating behaviors described in the appellate court reports, $p > .05$.

We again found support for our first hypothesis that mothers would use more indirect than direct forms of parental alienating behaviors. Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted for mothers and fathers separately and mothers were more likely to use indirect strategies ($M = 16.15$, $SD = 17.65$) than direct strategies ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 7.23$), $t(19) = 2.51$, $p = .02$, CIs 1.69 to 18.71. We again failed to find a statistically significant difference in the use of direct or indirect strategies for fathers, $p > .05$. To further examine this issue, we created dummy codes for indirect/direct proportions as was done in Study 1 (with below 47% coded 0 (more direct), above 53% coded 1 (more indirect), and 50% \pm 3% coded as 2). The percentage of alienating parents who fell into each category

appears in Table 2. A large proportion of mothers (80.0%) had a clear preference for using indirect strategies, which is a much higher percentage than in Study 1, and only 15% of mothers were recorded as preferring direct strategies (5% using similar levels of both). Similar proportions to Study 1 were found in relation to fathers; that is, fathers in Study 2 favored indirect (45%) and direct strategies (40%), and 15% tended to use both in equal amounts. Therefore, results of Study 2 provided additional support for the first two hypotheses: mothers preferred the use of indirect over direct aggression, while some fathers preferred indirect and others preferred using direct strategies (only 15% tended to use both strategies fairly equally).

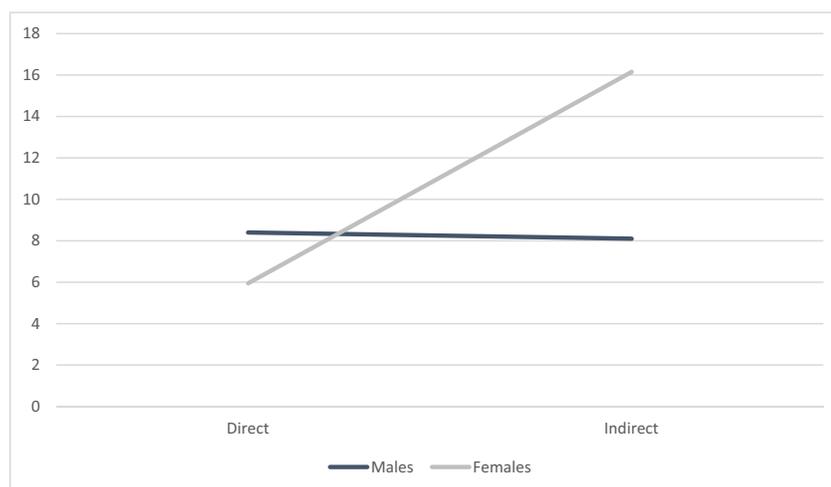
As with Study 1, we hypothesized that fathers would use more direct forms of aggression than mothers, and that mothers and fathers would use similar levels of indirect aggression. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted and we once again found a main effect for type of aggression: mothers and fathers used more indirect ($M = 12.13$, $SD = 13.61$) than direct forms ($M = 7.18$, $SD = 7.84$) of aggression, $F(1,38) = 5.49$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.63$. Unlike Study 1, however, we did find a statistically significant Gender \times Type of aggression interaction effect, $F(1,38) = 6.18$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.68$. This interaction effect is illustrated in Fig. 1. That is, men and women were found to use similar levels of direct aggression (with men using just slightly more). However, mothers used considerably more indirect behaviors than fathers. We did not find support for our hypothesis that men would use more direct strategies than women.

In summary, using 40 appellate rulings from legal cases in which parental alienation was found, we again found support for our hypothesis that mothers prefer to use indirect parental alienating behaviors over direct forms. However, we did not find support for our hypothesis that fathers use more direct aggression than mothers, but we did find that they both tend to use more indirect than direct forms overall.

General Discussion

Parents who alienate their children from another parent utilize many different strategies. We examined whether there were gender differences in the use of direct and indirect forms of parental alienating behaviors, as past research has indicated that females tend to prefer using indirect over direct forms of aggression, and men tend to prefer using more direct aggression. We tested these hypotheses using two very different samples: (1) interviews with targeted parents and (2) legal appellate rulings in which parental alienation was documented. In both studies, we found support for mothers preferring to use indirect forms of aggression, but we did not find support for fathers preferring to use direct forms of aggression. Again, in both studies, mothers were using significantly more indirect

Fig. 1 Mean number of direct and indirect aggressive behaviors, by gender (Study 2, $N=40$)



than direct parental alienating strategies, that is, they were more likely to use circuitous approaches to harm the targeted parent and their relationship with their child, such as derogating the targeted parent to others, increasing loyalty of the children, and filing numerous false accusations of abuse against the targeted parent. This finding is consistent with the work of López et al. (2014) who found women that are more likely than men to use indirect strategies (e.g., frighten the child to fear the targeted parent). In contrast, we found that fathers tended to use similar levels of both types of aggression.

However, we did *not* find support for the hypothesis that fathers prefer to use more direct forms of this type of aggression than mothers. In these studies, however, we did not examine physical aggression separately from other forms of direct aggression (e.g., blocking access to a child) and perhaps we would have found gender effects had we examined the physical aspects of direct aggression. Both mothers and fathers used more indirect than direct aggression. While this preference can be expected due to having comparatively less direct contact with the other parent than for people who are still in a relationship together (e.g., marriage), direct forms of aggression are more easily identifiable and therefore likely to backfire on the perpetrator. For example, if an alienating parent prevents visits between a child and the targeted parent, this is a much more obvious action than if they talk badly about the targeted parent on the phone to a family member in the presence of their children. Violation of court orders and acts of physical aggression are more easily prosecuted, so it is understandable that indirect aggression is a favored approach for both mothers and fathers.

Indirect aggression is often difficult to identify because of the hidden and manipulative ways it is used. Unfortunately, the preference for the use of indirect aggression poses challenges for the targeted parent, as it is more difficult for them to provide direct evidence of it occurring. For example, how does a parent document badmouthing behaviors of the alienating parent if they only hear secondhand that the behavior

occurred? Our findings, therefore, have serious implications for legal and mental health professionals working with families in which parental alienating behaviors are being perpetrated. If most parental alienating behaviors are indirect in nature, interviews with parents and direct observations of the family will not often reveal them. Rather, alternative sources of information must be utilized to assess and diagnose parental alienation, such as reviewing years of email and text communications between parties, allegations made in police reports and motions filed with courts, reports from unaligned third parties (e.g., teachers, coaches, and neighbors), phone records, and photographs. In a critical review of custody evaluations, Bow and Quinnell (2002) found that only 78.8% of child custody reports in their sample had reviews of such material, and the extent of these reviews was not clear. Only by conducting a thorough review of such evidence can more indirect forms of parental alienating behaviors be identified and verified beyond the narrative of the parents, which are prone to distortions, exaggerations, denial, and manipulation (e.g., Austin 2002). These findings also support the need for policy and procedural changes for family care workers (e.g., child protection workers) and law enforcement personnel to use in their assessments and evaluations of families to screen for parental alienation and other forms of family violence.

Our results suggest that women engage in considerably more indirect than direct forms of aggression, so gender biases in assessment of parental alienation are likely because such behaviors are harder to identify than direct behaviors. Indeed, despite there being few gender differences in who is likely to be a perpetrator of parental alienating behaviors (Harman et al. 2016, 2019), Lorandos (*in press*) has found large gender disparities in the proportion of appellate cases brought by mothers and fathers due to parental alienation, with fathers being overrepresented. Legal and administrative aggression, such as making false claims of abuse, are more easily used by women against men because people are likely to believe

claims of abuse made by women (Hines et al. 2015). False accusations of abuse are not only detrimental to the targeted parent but can take a great toll on the long-term mental health of the children. Better standards of practice for the assessment of parental alienation must be developed to prevent misdiagnoses and biases.

The two studies are not without their limitations. Although we coded each mention of behavior as discrete, it is not likely that all the behaviors of the alienating parent were described. For example, when a parent or appellate judge mentioned/reported that the alienator filed 10 false reports of abuse, this action was recorded 10 times. However, if the parent stated that the alienator talked badly about them “all the time,” then a frequency count could not be generated. If the parent described specific people as being involved with or targeted by the alienating parent’s derogation campaign (e.g., “she told my boss I stole money from work”), these were coded as discrete instances, but a separate code could not be created for ambiguous numbers of targets (e.g., “he talked bad about me to all my friends”). In addition, it is not likely that the targeted parent was able to know all the behaviors of the alienating parent. Indirect aggression is circuitous and difficult to pinpoint, and targeted parents often have minimal information about the private lives of the alienators and their children. It is highly likely that more indirect aggression was occurring than what was reported, so it is possible that there may be gender differences in the use of indirect aggression that could not be captured from the reports of the targeted parents. Direct aggression, in comparison, is often more obvious and clearer, and the descriptions were quite detailed for these events. Future research would benefit by utilizing additional sources of information about the behaviors of the parents, such as interviews with extended family members or reviews of the entire court record involving the family.

Additionally, without corroborating evidence or data from the other parent, it is impossible to determine whether the parents we interviewed for our first study were actually alienated from their children, or whether they were estranged, meaning that the child’s rejection of the targeted parent was justified and not exaggerated based on some actual past interaction or experience with the parent (e.g., sexual abuse). We did find that the parents generally scored above the mean on our alienation screening tool, and the experiences that they described were hauntingly similar and stressful across participants from all parts of the U.S. and several different countries. That said, Study 2 was designed to overcome most of the limitations described here by use of appellate court rulings from U.S. cases where parental alienation had been determined in a court of law.

The second study we conducted addressed other limitations of the first, such as the fact that the first study was based on reports of the targeted parent. By utilizing appellate rulings, we were able to account for behaviors documented for both parents in a court of law. Unfortunately, there is not presently a

way to determine the full extent of alienating behaviors used by parents, as many of these behaviors occur behind closed doors and over extended periods of time. That said, because direct aggression is more readily observable than indirect aggression, it is notable that indirect strategies were still the most frequently used by alienating parents. Although we had some international diversity in the first study’s sample, the majority of the sample were from the U.S., and our second study only examined U.S. appellate cases. Future research would benefit from examining whether the gender differences we found in our study also exist in other cultures and contexts.

Future research could also look more closely at the behaviors of the parent and child based on the age of the child, mental health status and custodial status of the parent, child support orders, and the length of time the parents have been separated or divorced. Targeted parents and the appellate rulings described many different behaviors that their children and the alienating parent did over time, but did not always clarify what the age was of the child at the time that they perpetrated the action, how much time they were spending with the targeted parent on a weekly basis, whether money was a motivator for pursuing more parenting time (e.g., to obtain more child support) or how long it had been since they and the alienating parent have been separated or divorced. These factors will be important to examine in future research because they could influence how specific behaviors are interpreted. For example, an elementary aged child who throws a toy at a parent has very different ramifications than a teenager who pushes or hits a parent. It is also possible that different types of alienating strategies are used by alienating behaviors based on the age of the child, so future research would benefit by looking at such patterns over time. Future research should also examine families over time and gain a deeper understanding of when alienating behaviors typically begin and whether targeted parents “turned the other cheek” during the early stages of parental alienation, thereby allowing the escalation and solidification of such behaviors. It would also be very informative to examine whether there may be different motivators for particular forms of parental alienating behaviors and whether these vary by gender or another individual difference (e.g., personality disorder).

In conclusion, parental alienating behaviors are a serious form of family violence that cause very negative outcomes for children, the targeted parent, and extended family (Harman et al. 2018; Kruk 2018; von Boch-Galhau 2018). Our research indicates that most behaviors that cause these negative outcomes are indirect in nature and are therefore more difficult to identify than direct behaviors. Due to gender differences in the preferential use of indirect over direct behaviors, it is imperative that professionals utilize strategies to better assess indirect parental alienating behaviors to more accurately diagnose parental alienation and prevent gender biases in assessment.

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Appendix

Table 3 Parental alienation screening tool items for Study 1 interviewee selection

1. My children have said mean things to me.
2. My children are very negative towards me.
3. My children complain a lot about me to their other parent
4. My children complain to other people about me (e.g., other family members, friends, teachers).
5. My children avoid talking about me to others.
6. My children idealize the other parent.
7. The other parent says mean things about me to make my children upset with me.
8. The other parent tries to get my children to think bad about me.
9. My children avoid getting close to me, or spending time with me because of what the other parent has made them believe about me.
10. My children seem angry with me because of what the other parent says about me.
11. The other parent bad-mouths me to other people in an effort to make me look bad.
12. Parents of my children's friends avoid me because of what they have heard from the other parent.
13. I have been accused of being abusive towards the other parent
14. I have been accused of being abusive towards my children
15. No matter what I say or do, my children believe what the other parent says about me.
16. I do not have many friends now due to what the other parent has said about me.
17. My children put their own needs aside to please the other parent.
18. In my children's eyes, the other parent can do no wrong
19. My ex tries to limit the amount of time I spend with my child(ren), despite legal arrangements.
20. My ex engages with the court system to further limit the time I spend with my children
21. My ex interprets all legal orders or previous arrangements "by the book" and is not flexible about anything (e.g., negotiating a later drop-off or pick-up).

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